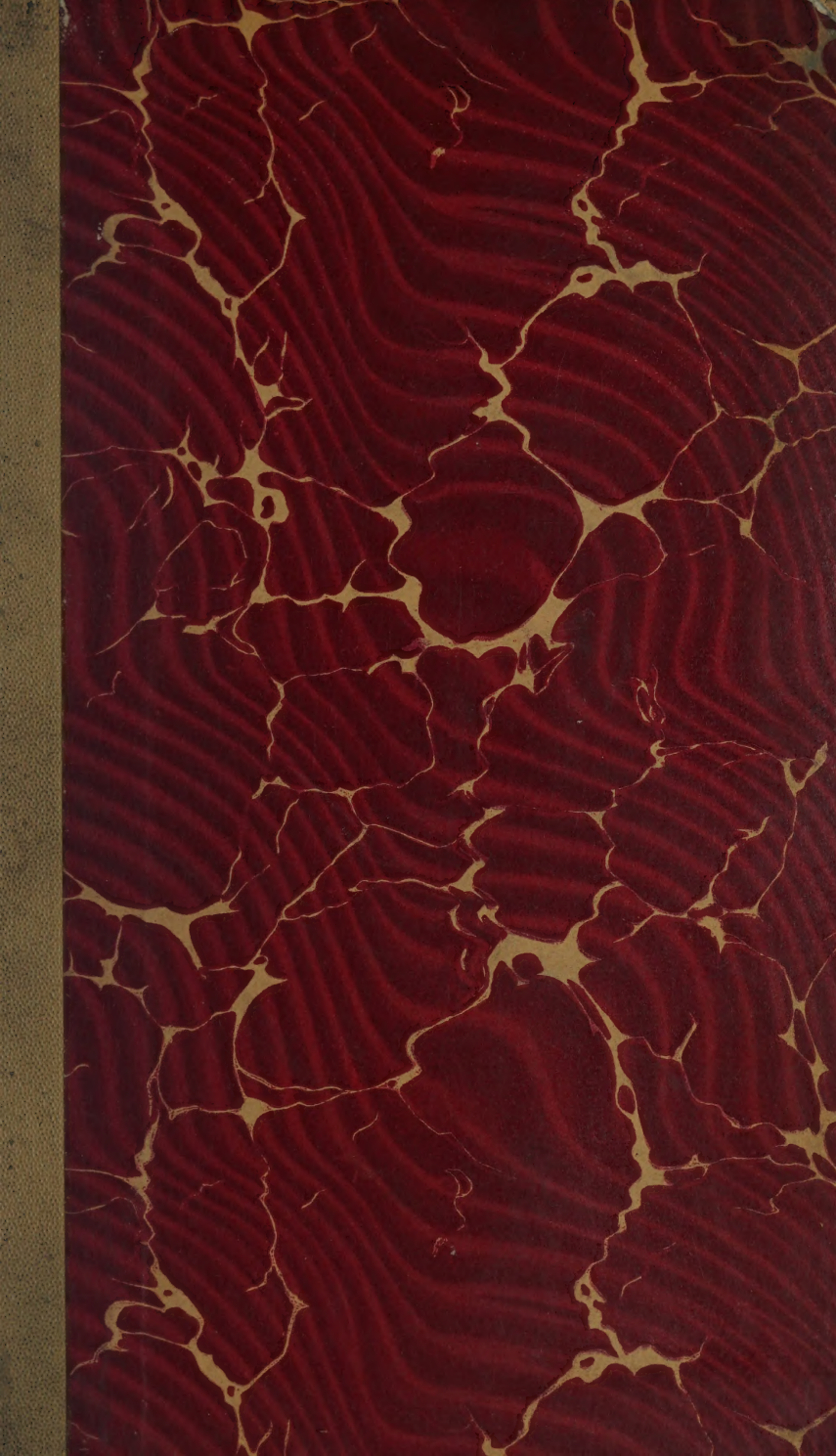




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PRACTICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

BY

J. I. WYER, Jr.

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BULLETIN OF BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRACTICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY.

BY J. I. WYER, JR.

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PRACTICAL bibliography, as the term will be used in this article, means the ability to find promptly and to record as completely as possible, all the data and information concerning the literature of any subject.

This is a restricted definition of even the practical side of bibliography, as it disregards the large use by the book-trade and the order departments of libraries.

It is, however, purely subject bibliography as it serves the scholar which is our present topic.

Obviously this subject, as it definitely touches library work, will be most intimately connected with college libraries and the larger reference libraries.

Over fifty thousand books are published each year in English, French and German. This number tends to increase, and to it must be added the vast number of pamphlets, periodical articles, publications of learned institutions and societies and of governments which swell the total to a figure truly formidable.

The untrained student of some tiny corner of the realm of science may well stand aghast at the task which confronts him of sifting from out this flood of printed paper, the few titles which concern his work.

Even mature scholars are often pitifully helpless before the bibliography of their subject.

The greatest burden on the modern investigator is the necessity of beating a path through this literary wilderness.

He must find the pertinent literature which may furnish him with material and suggestion, but, more important still, he must make sure that he is not about to do over again some work that has been done before and the results already recorded.

All this wastes valuable time better spent in study or laboratory, and worse still, scholars and specialists are usually such clumsy and uncertain bibliographers, that results secured are never quite conclusive enough to dispel a haunting doubt of their absolute accuracy. It is within the past sixty or seventy years that printed books have increased in number so enormously. It is only the last forty years that have seen the remarkable increase in technical journals. It is more recently still that learned societies have multiplied and become extensive publishers and that government has so enlarged its function of printer.

As a direct result of this flood of literature has grown the necessity for practical bibliography. Paths must be made through it. Indexes must be had.

Bibliography, standing alone, preceded by neither definite nor indefinite article, is defined in the opening sentence above. Now one more definition, — *a* bibliography is a list or catalog of the literature of a specific subject or of the writings of a single author. The specific subject may be "All books printed in the United States," which is trade bibliography, or it may be merely "The

Plankton of lake Titicaca," which is subject bibliography. The precise form may range from the tiny pamphlet, poorly printed on cheap paper, issuing from a musty little bookshop in Leipzig, to the sumptuous set of a dozen volumes printed at the cost of the mightiest government on earth. Each is but a list of the literature of some subject, and these lists, variously called catalogs, repositories, bibliographies, guides, indexes, are the tools of the practical bibliographer, the literature with which he works. These bibliographies have increased in number and extent with the increase in printed books, until some half dozen important volumes of bibliography of bibliographies now testify to the need of cataloging the catalogs, while in a recent publication by the Bibliographical Society of Chicago, forty-five pages are filled with what is, despite its simpler title, nothing less than a bibliography of bibliographies of bibliographies. This is quite bewildering to the layman and requires a distinct mental wrench to comprehend, but it shows plainly that bibliography, the science of guide-posts, is assuming proportions which amply justify careful attention to it by all serious students. The time is rapidly passing when the title Professor of bibliography provokes an indulgent smile. In many college and university libraries lectures are given by the librarian on bibliography, and seminars, or classes, are organized with appropriate laboratory work for instruction in the use of books.

The librarian who is a trained bibliographer can be of substantial use in many ways even to a constituency of scholars and specialists. The librarian who is not only a trained bibliographer,

but a broad scholar, will find before him countless possibilities for very real and, above all, intelligent service, not only in pointing out the devious ways through the mazes of literature, which are ever becoming vaster and more intricate, but in the very important matter of wise initiative and direction in building up a symmetrical and well chosen library.

In this age of specialists, however, broad scholars are the rare exception, not the rule. This suggests, then, what seems to be the inevitable tendency in the production of good bibliographers. A man who knows a great deal about everything will sometimes be attracted to bibliography. Let us hope this may be increasingly true, but everything points another way, the line of least resistance is in another direction. The making of bibliographies, on cards, in separate volumes, as appendixes to monographs, in footnotes, is increasing enormously. It will soon be impossible, it may be so even now, for any one man to cope with the entire domain and to bring to bibliographic work enough special knowledge of even a small number of subjects to be of much use to even the specialist. Instead of subscribing to the dictum that a man must know everything to be a bibliographer, the trained specialist will ask, why may not I, who am carefully trained in geology, add to my geology a sufficient knowledge of general bibliography and a thorough knowledge of the bibliography of geology, and in this way be of the utmost use to my chosen profession as bibliographer for the geologists. And he is right. It will not be long before there will be professors of bibliography associated with every department of study ; whose business it

will be to know, and know intimately, the whole literature, or the records of the literature, of their subject. These men, of course, will be just as thoroughly trained in their particular science or art as though they were to do research work in it themselves. They will furnish to investigators in that science complete information of all that has been written on the subject before. They will see to it that formal bibliographies appended to books published by workers in their department shall not be the disorderly, inaccurate, irrelevant, hotchpotch of titles which are so often found tossed together and labeled bibliography, while violating all accepted bibliographical criteria.

Another reason why this union of bibliographer and specialist is imperative is that bibliographies, even the most pretentious of them, vary greatly in value ; they may be incomplete, the titles ignorantly chosen at random, the classification crude or unscientific, and to distinguish rightly between good and bad bibliographies is coming to require a technical knowledge of the subject of which the bibliography deals.

It is not enough in order to compile a useful bibliography of School Hygiene, of Biological Variation, or of any subject, that the compiler be an accurate, industrious and painstaking bibliographer. He must not only know bibliography, but he must know the subject of which he is making the bibliography. Again, the deluge of literature on all subjects is making it more and more useless, if not impossible, to attempt complete bibliographies, and the student who uses a list of references is coming to insist that the bare facts of the imprint, the technical descrip-

tion of a title, be they never so faithfully recorded, are insufficient.

The most fundamental and imperative of all points is the descriptive or critical analysis or estimate of the title. A good deal of impatience has been manifest of late, in reviews of bibliographic work, with the author writing as an expert with all the important literature of the subject under his eye, who refuses to tell about it, but sets down bare titles in his list of authorities.

To use a technical term, a bibliography must be "annotated" and the notes must not be perfunctory, colorless commonplaces, but must ring with authority, solid information and expert knowledge of the subject. A mere list of titles often leaves the most important part of the work still to be done by the searcher, while further intelligent, concise, authoritative information as to character or content of a book, its relation to other books on the same subject with some estimate of merits or note of defects, often reveals to the student just the value or valuelessness of the book for the immediate purpose. Obviously such notes can be made only by one who knows the subject as well as how to make a bibliography of it. There are both bibliographers and specialists who hold that any evaluation of titles is beyond the proper function of a bibliographer; that his work ends with the external description of the book or article; that any opinion by a tyro is presumptuous and worthless, while expert opinions usually fail of a standpoint sufficiently objective to prevent narrow, over-zealous, bitter or fulsome reviews. This is too large a question to settle

here. The preference, however, is growing stronger and stronger for signed evaluation by experts and the success of several notable pieces of such work indicates that sound and helpful notes, both descriptive and critical, are possible and of exceeding value to all users of books. The judgment of the compiler will not be always right, nor need his estimates be accepted by his brethren of another school without full allowance for the personal equation. Such objections are no arguments against evaluation. They may serve to emphasize its dangers and defects, but unless the bibliographer cordially recognizes that a mere catalog of titles falls far short of its greatest usefulness, if unaccompanied by brief but competent descriptive and critical comment, practical bibliography will fail to live up to its greatest opportunity.



